Epilogue
Converting the Isles: Continuity and Transformation

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Conversion to Christianity involves profound change, the precise nature of which is context bound. The developments associated with it in early medieval Europe encompassed social, economic, political, and cultural spheres, as well as religious, and affected all main areas of people's lives. The preceding chapters have elucidated how this transformative movement operated in interconnected regions of north-western Europe, broadly categorized as the Isles, or the insular world. Specific strands of that research are addressed in this Epilogue.[1]

Conversion to Christianity is presented and frequently perceived as a new beginning — the commencement of a phase which will be significantly different from what has gone before. This theme permeates conversion narratives: by way of example, the contrast between St Patrick and the recalcitrant pagan king Láegaire mac Néill is made abundantly clear in the seventh-century *Life* of that saint by Muirchú.[2] A focus on change, however, is inherent to and institutionalized within Christianity itself: the story of Creation sets out God's transformative events in a six-day cycle, while the break with the past signified by the birth of Jesus is symbolized by the recalibration of time thereafter, through the use of a separate calendrical (*anno domini*) scheme, first introduced by Dionysius Exiguus in the sixth century and made famous by Bede's use of it two centuries later.[3] Yet even for its adherents, continuity prevails, delineated in a series of Ages: from Adam to the Flood, and through the kingships of Abraham and David, from the Babylonian Exile to the Incarnation and thence to the end of (worldly) time. The Sixth Age of these *aetates mundi* ('ages of the world'), beginning with Christ's birth and paralleling the last day (Saturday) of God's creative week, should be followed by a Seventh Age, the eschatological equivalent of God's final day of rest.[4] Preparation for that eternity is the purpose of a Christian life.

The concept of the afterlife was clearly central to early Christians in Britain, Ireland, Iceland, and Scandinavia, as it was to their counterparts elsewhere. It had been no less so to some at least of their pagan forbears whose ritualistic interactions with dead ancestors sought to ward off the forces of evil. Christianity should be required to demonstrate a similar efficacy

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[1] I am greatly indebted to Eric Cambridge, Nancy Edwards, and Roy Flechner for comments on what follows.

[2] Muirchú, *Vita S. Patricii*, ed. and trans. by Bieler.

[3] Joel Robbins has discussed how 'the Christian call for radical change at conversion' has informed research in the anthropology of Christianity: 'Transcendence and the Anthropology of Christianity', pp. 12–15.

[4] This common scheme of Christian chronology was elaborated and developed by St Augustine as early as the fifth century AD in his *De civitate Dei* (*The City of God*). This in turn informed the writings of Isidore, an influential seventh-century bishop of Seville whose work was drawn on by a number of English and Irish authors, including Bede in his *De temporibus* (*Time*) and *De tempore ratione* (*The Reckoning of Time*): see Palmer, 'Calculating Time and the End of Time in the Carolingian World' and his 'The Ordering of Time'.

in matters of protection to fulfil the needs of the population at large. In this connection, we may note that prayers for the dead become gradually more frequent from the seventh century onwards, in ecclesiastical environments, but also perhaps in cemeteries which were visited for the specific purpose of interceding on behalf of the deceased.[5] In Iceland, as Orri Vésteinsson has suggested, a perception that the new religion was in fact more successful in its control of the natural environment may have added to its appeal.[6] This forms part of the explanation posited by him for the relatively abrupt change in cemetery location from (pagan) periphery to (Christian) centre, from outside the defined homestead to an important place within. Yet abandoning the use of grave goods or adopting the practice of east–west inhumation was scarcely motivated solely by a desire to enter heaven, not to mention the difficulties involved in using such customs to determine the spread of Christianity in the first place. As Orri Vésteinsson and others have noted, there is no simple direct correlation between specific changes in material culture and religious belief.[7] These developments must be viewed in the context of a broader cultural background in which conversion to Christianity forms a major strand.

What that conversion entailed varied widely, but its effects were manifold, long-lasting, and profound. The extent to which it involved not just acceptance of Christianity but also rejection of pagan beliefs has been explored by Barbara Yorke. Bede was of the opinion that renunciation was important, but contemporary kings may have taken an alternative view. Notwithstanding this, the perception of pagan gods undoubtedly shifted, but in various ways. Demonization and banishment were applied to them, but they were also recast as humans with the concomitant loss of power that that entailed.[8] Rejection of them was thus made easier, but controlling gods in this altered state also permitted celebration of their past deeds. Vernacular literature in Ireland from the seventh century and in Anglo-Saxon England from somewhat later revelled in their activities as otherworldly beings. Ireland in particular is noteworthy for its embracement of such creatures, seeing conversion as 'more of a consummation of the pagan past than a replacement for it', as Barry Lewis has noted.[9] Indeed Elizabeth O'Brien has suggested that Christians and pagans may sometimes have been buried side by side.[10] In a Scandinavian context, the *æsir*, euhemerized pagan deities, are often linked with exiles from Troy.[11] Siân Grønlie has described how the depiction of pre-Christian heroes was influential in the portrayal of missionary saints in Icelandic literature of the thirteenth century and later, King Óláfr Tryggvason of Norway, for example, being presented as mixture of holy man, warrior, and thug. A Welsh manuscript of the same date, the Black Book of Carmarthen, preserves an earlier collection of verses, *Englynion y Beddau* (*The Stanzas of the Graves*), in

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[5] Effros, *Caring for Body and Soul*; I owe both observation and reference to Nancy Edwards.

[6] When no further information is provided, the author's chapter in this collection is intended; references provided by contributors in the discussion alluded to have not been repeated here.

[7] See also the contributions by Nancy Edwards, p. 0, and Roy Flechner, p. 0, above.

[8] Such rationalization is, of course, common in other cultures also: see, for example, Robbins's comments on the Urapmin of New Guinea who downgraded their ancestral gods from supernatural creatures to human beings: 'How Do Religions End?'. Note in particular the comments on his views by Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Constructing Continuity', pp. 20–21, together with Robbins's reply, pp. 24–25.

[9] Drawing on Clare Stancliffe's work, 'The Miracle Stories in Seventh-Century Irish Saints' Lives', pp. 102–07; see also Carey, *A Single Ray of the Sun*. This issue is further discussed in Elva Johnston's contribution to volume II of *Converting the Isles*.

[10] See further her contribution to volume II of *Converting the Isles*.

[11] See, for example, Faulkes, 'Descent from the Gods'.

which prehistoric grave mounds are envisaged as the burial place of ancient heroes.[12] The landscape of literature brings together perceived past and physical present as one.[13]

As such examples indicate, regional attitudes varied, and the diversity at a more local level was greater still. Martin Carver has emphasized the development of what he terms 'local religious prescriptions' in his discussion of the increased number of long cist graves in eastern Scotland from the sixth and seventh centuries. In association with Class I symbol stones, he reads these as an initial Pictish response to Christianity, the slightly later 'head-box' burials, as well as Class II stones, expressing the new religion in a more institutional form.[14] The significance of such geographical differences is often difficult to assess, considering how dissimilar extant evidence pertaining to our various regions can be. Nancy Edwards remarks upon the scarcity of early written sources from Wales which might shed light on the conversion period. A rare exception is the *Life of St Samson of Dol*, the seventh-century date of which is endorsed by Lewis in his detailed reading of that *Vita*. As hagiography it brings with it its own difficulties, not least in recognizing the author's personal voice in a genre in which literary topoi and formulae abound, as Lewis demonstrates above. James Palmer's analysis of saints' *Lives* in their manuscript context is useful in this respect, highlighting as it does the ways in which similar themes and motifs function across a group of interconnected texts. The question of literary influence is equally pertinent in areas from which more substantial numbers of documents have survived. Thomas Charles-Edwards comments upon the issue of direct borrowing from the writings of Gildas and Gregory the Great in his discussion of early Ireland (from where written material has survived in comparative abundance). Indirect influence is also attested, as in the reconfiguration of the *Life of Boniface* for a Continental audience familiar with Columbanus, as Palmer has shown, in an illustration of what he calls 'context-dependent appropriations of a repertoire of ideas'.

Recreation of the cultural context of these texts, as far as possible, is essential to our understanding of what glimpses they provide of the conversion process and its effects. The Church remains an ever-present feature, since it both facilitated and controlled textual production. Alan Thacker's analysis of the development of the extensive Cuthbertine dossier in the eighth century provides an insight into the complexity and pervasiveness of high politics, as well as the importance attached to managing cultural memory by both ecclesiastical and secular elites. Memory is accorded a specific role in the authentication of the historical compendium *Íslendingabók* (*The Book of the Icelanders*) half a millennium later, since its author, Ari Þorgilsson, claimed as his authority the son of Iceland's first bishop, as Grønlie has outlined. As a pivotal narrative for the construction of Icelandic identity, the conversion myth recounted in *Íslendingabók* was — unsurprisingly — carefully controlled. In the same way, control had been exercised by the Church of Armagh in the creation of Ireland's influential conversion stories, seventh-century Patrician material by Muirchú and Tírechán, as both Charles-Edwards and Colmán Etchingham have probed. Lewis has analysed

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[12] 'The Black Book of Carmarthen "Stanzas of the Graves"', ed. by Jones; see also Rowland, *Early Welsh Saga Poetry*, especially pp. 294–98.

[13] For the Welsh example, see Petts, '*De situ Brecheniauc* and *Englynion y Beddau*'. Parallel material from Ireland is also found in the rich collection of 'place-name lore' (*Dindshenchas*) surviving from the eleventh and twelfth centuries: see, for example, *The Metrical Dindshenchas*, ed. and trans. by Gwynn. Sarah Semple has examined how prehistoric monuments were understood by Anglo-Saxon contemporaries down to the eleventh century: *Perceptions of the Prehistoric in Anglo-Saxon England*.

[14] In her contribution to volume II of *Converting the Isles*, Meggen Gondek focuses on the ideology of standing stones which display both Christian and non-Christian symbols side by side.

parallel Brittonic material, though it did not come into existence until the twelfth century (and drew considerably on Gildas). Self-defining myths of conversion retained a universal hold.[15]

The process as outlined in these authorized versions envisages, as Bede does, conversion from the top. Presenting it as a binary movement directed by a ruling king and missionary saint was in the interest of both royal and clerical elites. Notwithstanding its narrative appeal, the depiction must reflect reality to some degree: the success of the new religion can only have been secured with high-level support. As Thomas Pickles has observed, what was involved amounted to 'a creative fusion of lay aristocratic and Christian culture', 'intelligent dealing', as Wickham has put it, being required by both parties. The advantages that ensued to those occupying the upper echelons of power are described in detail in the previous pages. A career in the Church afforded status and opportunities; how the position of women in society was affected, however, is, as Sæbjørg Walaker Nordeide notes, difficult to gauge.[16] They have been associated with rune stones, including the Dynna stone from Norway which is decorated with Christian imagery.[17] They are also more visible in Icelandic Christian cemeteries, which are more inclusive than their pagan counterparts: assessing the complex evidence, however, Orri Vésteinsson concluded that, in terms of individuals, this does not necessarily reflect a significant social change.

Nonetheless, as he has stressed, social developments of this type are what the diverse evidence pertaining to conversion frequently illuminates, even more than the nature of the religious transformation itself. The link between the advent of Christianity and the particular change in question, however, is often difficult to assess. Wendy Davies and Roy Flechner have cautioned against dealing in 'monocausal explanations' in their assessment of the potential economic aspects of religious change. The beginnings of Christian culture in England were marked by considerable quantities of gold coinage. Yet, as explained by Rory Naismith, the relationship between the two phenomena is not a straightforward one of simple cause and effect, and they should be examined within the broader context of cross-cultural exchange. In the same way, the ideology of kingship evolved considerably in the early Christian period. As both Pickles and Gabor Thomas have observed, this may have preceded Christianity which could then have engendered further change. In the economic sphere, a similar situation might have prevailed, and the significance of long-term, as opposed to immediate, effects has been signalled by Davies in her examination of production for distribution of various kinds. Thomas too is concerned with rural production, demonstrating that major technological advances which have a bearing on it occurred in the eighth century rather than the tenth. Yet notwithstanding this earlier dating, the question remains open as to the extent of the influence of Christianity in this sphere, and Thomas's image of 'a complex web of interacting variables' must always be borne in mind.

The balance between change and continuity is crucial, as both Palmer and Yorke have underlined. Early Christians thought likewise to judge by their skilful appropriation of pagan sacred space as part of an ongoing strategy of power. Specific traces of this conceptual struggle are not always easy to unearth, and debate continues about the level of continuity visible at such major centres as Yeavering and Jelling, among others. As set out by Carver,

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[15] For a general discussion of conversion narratives in this period, see Bankert, 'Medieval Conversion Narratives'.

[16] Both Máire Herbert and Dawn Hadley discussed this aspect at oral contributions presented at a colloquium hosted at the University of Cambridge by 'Converting the Isles': 'Conversion and Social Change', 12 May 2012.

[17] The involvement of women in rune carving is discussed by Anne-Sofie Gräslund in her contribution to volume II of *Converting the Isles*.

Portmahamock exhibits defined phases corresponding to a changing ideology represented on the ground. The words of its *literati* are lost to us, including of those associated with the workshop for vellum preparation which appears to have been burnt down in a raid around the turn of the ninth century. The monastery of Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly, on the other hand, with which the Scottish monastery shows certain parallels, preserves a wealth of both archaeological and written remains.[18]

It is by evaluating distinct types of evidence in parallel that our understanding of how the Isles were converted will grow. Reconciling what are often contradictory sources brings with it particular challenges that call for new interpretative strategies and invite us to draw on methodologies from a variety of disciplines. Further light may be shed by the comparative approach advocated by Wickham, which examined conversion not only across cultures, but also across the conceptual and contextual divide that separates medieval sources from modern accounts of conversion. Analysing the extensive Irish evidence for Christian impact on economic development in the light of the more limited material from Scotland and Wales, for example, has enabled Davies to assess the degree to which 'environment, productive capacity, and population levels' also played a part in that development. Alex Woolf has drawn on comparative philology and history to elucidate the meaning of *plebs*, illuminating the organization of the British Church in the process. Thomas's assessment of the archaeological record of Lyminge, suggesting two-tiered occupancy, when placed alongside the charter evidence enables a more subtle, nuanced picture of its development to be drawn, the parallel with the monastery of Clonfad, Co. Westmeath, being useful in this regard. Carver and Nordeide have brought the issue of decoration and art style to bear on their analyses,[19] while Etchingham employed epigraphic evidence to reassess the date of Ireland's earliest Christian missions. Furthermore, specific place names in Patrick's writings facilitate his analysis of where the saint may have undertaken his work. And if a cautionary note resounds in his conclusion that 'precisely where and when he did so remains quite unclear', misconceptions have been addressed and what we do not and cannot know has come more sharply into view.

There is much that must remain elusive in chronicling the rise of Christianity in the insular world in the Middle Ages and thereby evaluating one of the most profound and formative cultural movements of historic times. Fundamental questions have been raised in the preceding chapters — concerning, for example, the role of missionaries, addressed by Ian Wood among others, and the pace and degree of Christianization — which have multiple answers (pertaining to a specific time and place), as well as none. Moreover, the process of negotiation of meaning between converter and converted, the continuing relevance of which Tomas Sundnes Drønen has drawn attention to in his anthropologist's account of a twentieth-century conversion story from northern Cameroon, has been explored. His description of contemporary Christianization as a global venture has resonance for the medieval period also, and its repercussions were as revolutionary then as now. Volume II, *Transforming Landscapes of Belief in the Early Medieval Insular World and Beyond*, will continue the discussion, examining the power of the word and that of ritual side by side, and addressing further developments associated with Christianity in the early medieval period in the insular world. The effects of the process of conversion to Christianity may often be elusive, but a growing body of soundly based, interrelated evidence from a diversity of disciplines is being harnessed to elucidate the major transformation that is Converting the Isles.

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[18] See the articles in King, *Clonmacnoise Studies*.

[19] See further the contributions by Meggen Gondek and Nancy Edwards in volume II of *Converting the Isles*.

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